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Review of Philip Arieti's Interpreting
Plato

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James A. Arieti. *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama*. Savage (MD): Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Ltd., 1991. Pp. x, 270. \$46.25 (hb.), \$16.95 (pb.). ISBN 0-8476-7662-5; 0-8476-7663-3.

Arieti's thesis is, as he realizes, subversive. He argues that Plato's works were not intended to be given close philosophical reading, that scholarship went off in the wrong direction in the generation after Plato, and that the very classification of the dialogues as *philosophy* in libraries confirms that wrong direction. If Plato's dialogues are not philosophy, what are they? *Drama*—prose comedies, at that, intended to portray Socrates and to advertise the Academy. Enlarging on Socrates' admission of creating "playful entertainment" in the *Phaedrus*, Arieti states: "Socrates' speech included enough philosophical remarks to give the impression of seriousness. As a whole, the dialogues do the same. It is no wonder that they have been assumed to be serious works." (p. 195)

Scholars have recognized dramatic qualities, of course, but have not gone far enough. Arieti will go all the way, taking dramatic purpose as his fundamental and all-explaining premise. There are times when the premise works—especially when Arieti argues that it is dramatically necessary for the arguments in the *Phaedo* to fail so that Socrates may show courage in dying. But often the premise does not take us far at all. Not that it is wrong; the problem may lie in Arieti's presentation. (a) Too much space is devoted to "plot summaries," which take up more than half the book. (b) The approach is reductionist. Arieti takes his premise as a license to jettison philosophical content. While it is admittedly tempting to dismiss the arguments of the *Timaeus* as mere parody of Pythagorean science, one hesitates to dismiss so lightly the *Meno's* doctrine of recollection as unconvincing, or Socrates' second speech of the *Phaedrus* as an example of foolish speechmaking.

Lively and provocative, *Interpreting Plato* offers a reading of Plato which is, in the end, diminished. The time-honored method of reading Plato—by "locking horns" with the arguments—has the awesome merit of *turning readers into philosophers*. Surely this was one of Plato's aims, not be subverted in the name of drama.

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